SPEECH OF MR. IMTIAZ AHMAD SAHIBZADA,
PRESIDENT, ASIAN OMBUDSMAN ASSOCIATION
AT THE 9TH ASIAN OMBUDSMAN ASSOCITION CONFERENCE
28TH NOVEMBER-1ST DECEMBER 2005 AT HONG KONG, SAR,
PEOPLES REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Your Excellency Ms. Alice Tai, Ombudsman of Hong Kong, Special Administrative Region, Peoples Republic of China, Members of the Asian Ombudsman Association, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

2. At the outset of what I have to say, I should like to request everyone present to observe a two-minute silence in memory of those thousands of people who recently lost their lives in the devastating earthquake that struck parts of Northern Pakistan and Kashmir on 8th October this year.

3. While on the subject let me also express the immense gratitude of the people and the Government of Pakistan to member countries of the international community for their prompt response, both in material and financial terms, for the immediate relief operations and of the pledges of assistance of almost six billion US dollars made for the rehabilitation of the affected areas in the donors Conference held in Islamabad the other day.

4. Reverting to the substance of this address, I wish to acknowledge with great gratitude the decision of Hong Kong to host this 9th Conference of the Asian Ombudsman Association and of giving me this opportunity to say a few words.

Ladies and gentlemen!

5. It is indeed an honour and a pleasure for me to extend a warm welcome to the Members of the Association and the other distinguished delegates present here today. I am grateful to them for making it convenient to attend the proceedings of this Conference in this bustling, vibrant and dynamic city of Hong Kong

which is the proud inheritor of the ancient civilization of China and the best that can be found in the Anglo-Saxon traditions of governance and economic enterprise. That it has become one of the more important financial centres of the East is a tribute to its industrious and enterprising people, the systems of governance and administration it has adopted—not the least of which is the Office of its Ombudsman—and the well informed and far-sighted policies of the great Peoples Republic of China. It has emerged as a model of economic growth, development and good governance, quite a number of aspects of which are worthy of emulation by the developing countries of the Region.

6. Since the last Conference was held at Seoul, Republic of Korea in April, 2004, a number of changes have taken place in the ranks of the Members of the Association. Mr. Justice Niazi, is the new Head of the General Inspection, Islamic Republic of Iran, Mr. Ryoji Fukui has taken over as the Director General, Administrative Evaluation Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan, Mr. Justice Munir A. Sheikh, is now the Federal Tax Ombudsman, Pakistan; Mr. Abdur Rashid Khan, Mr. K. Yousuf Jamal and Mr. Justice Fazal-ur-Rahman, have been appointed as the Provincial Ombudsmen of the Provinces of the Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan, respectively, in Pakistan. We wish them a warm welcome to the fraternity and trust that, they will play a significant role in promoting the cause of Ombudsmanship under the auspices of the Asian Ombudsman Association. While welcoming the new incumbents I should like very much to place on record the significant contribution of their predecessors i.e. Mr. Sayyid Ebrahim Raiesee of Iran, Mr. Tamura of Japan, Justices Saleem Akhtar, Sajjad Ahmad Sipra, Haziqul Khairi and Mr. Sikandar Khan of Pakistan, towards the functioning of the Association and of the discharge of their functions within their respective jurisdictions of their home countries.

7. Ladies and Gentlemen! The theme of this year’s Conference i.e. “Evolving Ombudsman Office” has been indeed well chosen. With some academicians tracing its

roots to the Control Yuan of Ancient China, the Office of the *Tribune* and the *Censors* in Roman times and the Islamic Office of the *Nazar-ul-Mazalim*, the Ombudsman's Office in its present form owes its existence to the Swedish Institution of *Justitieombudsman* which was created in 1809 and assigned the duty of ensuring that the laws and statutes were adhered to and their civil servants fulfilled their obligations. Since then approximately 138 Ombudsman offices located in more than 40 countries have come into existence. This is a glowing tribute to the importance of the Office in the promotion of 'good governance' which is so central an issue for political and socio-economic development and the establishment of a just and equitable society based on the rule of law.

8. Although the characteristics of the Office may, and usually do, differ from country to country, the basic concept remains the same i.e. an independent Office designed to receive, investigate and pursue resolution of complaints by citizens concerning administrative acts or decisions of Government. Whether this is done by arbitration, mediation, conciliation, negotiation or adjudication, the central thrust is always to curb mal-administration. By curbing mal-administration from the discharge of functions and responsibilities by public sector organizations in a cost-effective and expeditious manner and through comparatively simple and uncomplicated procedures, the Office has established itself as perhaps the most important institution of alternate dispute resolution and the redress of individual grievances arising from the interface of the Government and the citizens.

9. Organisations when created are the product of the history and the specific circumstances of each country prevailing at the time. While this is so, an organisation to be relevant and credible has to continuously evolve in keeping with the requirements and needs of a society which is in a state of continuous and rapid change. Although the impetus for this, and the form that it takes, will essentially have to be country-specific, a great deal in this regard can be learnt from the experiences of each

other. While the successful models elsewhere cannot be replicated in their entirety in other countries, some of the principles on which they are based and the procedures in use for discharge of responsibilities, can certainly be adopted and adapted to structure our respective institutions on more efficient and effective lines and thereby cope with the needs dictated by the rapidly changing socio-economic and administrative circumstances of each country. Ombudsmen Offices must constantly evolve and react to changing external trends. How effectively this is done will be a measure of its efficiency and of its continued relevance to the needs of the time.

10. It is in this context that the main theme of the Conference has so aptly been chosen by the dynamic and learned Ombudsman of Hong Kong. For although the traditional model of the Office was a 'generalist' office, with a geographical jurisdiction at the national or sub-national level, meant for redress of the grievances of citizens against agencies and departments of the Government, the principle has, over a period of time, been extended to include within its remit the activities of the private sector as well. Moreover, with the increasing specialisation and differentiation of functions of public administration, the traditional model is gradually evolving on the one hand into different kinds of subject-specific, specialty Ombudsmen Offices (such as Tax, Insurance, Banking, Industry) and on the other is increasing the scope of its functions to embrace issues relating to such areas as investigation of corrupt practices, human rights violations, children and youth, to mention just a few.

11. The sub-themes of the Conference too have a special relevance and significance in this regard. These are i.e. (a) the Relationship of the Ombudsman's Office with Government and other stake holders (b) Measuring Effectiveness of Ombudsman Offices (c) Promoting Public Awareness (d) Freedom of Information (FOI) and Protected Disclosure Legislation (e) Development of Specialty and Industry Ombudsmen and their Relationship with The Ombudsman; and (f) Handling Complaints from Prisoners.

12. The speeches of the lead-speakers on these sub-themes, the views of the panelists and the general discussions that are likely to follow will, I am certain, provide us valuable leads into the core issue of change and evolution of the Ombudsman Office and of the consequential re-orientation and re-structuring of the existing offices and the creation of new ones, where required, within our respective countries. Of equal importance in this connection, I am sure, will be the informal discussions and views exchanged between delegates during the three or four days of our inter-action and association here in Hong Kong.

13. In conclusion, please allow me on behalf of all the members of the Board and on my own behalf, to acknowledge with great gratitude the excellent work done by Ms. Alice Tai, Ombudsman of Hong Kong—and Secretary not only of the Asian Ombudsmen Association but of the International Ombudsmen Institute as well—and of the good work put in by the members of the staff of her organization for making our stay so comfortable. We are being looked after extremely well and look forward to a memorable stay in this beautiful city.

14. On a personal note as President of the Association let me also profusely thank Ms. Alice Tai for the hard, enthusiastic and extremely professional assistance that she has provided, and always with a smiling face, to the Association as its Secretary during the last four years of my tenure. Since this is the last Conference that I am attending I should also like to place on record my appreciation of the cooperation that I have received from Members of the Association and of the Board of Directors over the past four years. I am confident that the spirit of understanding and tolerance displayed, and cooperation extended to me in the discharge of the business of the Association will continue to be exhibited and extended to my successor. The relationships formally established should continue to be informally maintained and in this regard let me assure you all that my modest house in Islamabad may be considered a second home if circumstance should bring you to Pakistan, which I hope they will.

Thank you.